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Chapter 9

Virtual Tourism Exploring Scotland by CD-ROM

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I would like to start this paper by quoting from an interview with the Douglas Lowe brothers. They are members of the Rastafarian Black Douglas clan, and I first met these regular visitors to Scotland at the Braemar Gathering in 1998:

I like the Highlands, this is where the ancient Moray people used to live and we're Moors—Mooray, Moors, we're all of them—so that's why we're here, and just to enjoy the festivities and the people.... In America [we go to Highland Games]. California's a big place you see, we've got 25 million people there so that's a lotta games!....

All I'm looking to see is different people, and you meet different kinds of people here. I guess the highlight to me is that the royal family comes here...our other particular reason is that we make a presence here which is not normally here, which is kind of *reclamation*, *reclaiming* and restoring our presence here at the Games...and that's part of what it is to me....

The Games were originally from one of the Black Moors, Malcolm Canmore, the Moor, to train his soldiers to do his fighting. That's what Brae Moor's all about. *Moor's Land* meaning dark skinned and we've got dark skin, we're Douglasses, right? So that's why we're here! And that's what they're missing! [*laughs*]... We have the lion, the heart and the crown [of the Douglas crest] and the African symbol of Ankh, and you know the ancient Scots came from Africa, in Egypt, in Scotia, and we're their descendants, some of them, and we're just a thousand years later! (Bold and McKean, 1999)¹

¹ An earlier version of this paper is Bold 2001.

I wanted to start with this quotation because it encapsulates the sense of personal engagement that makes us receive tourist destinations in unique ways: this is the underlying theme of my paper. I'd like to consider the potential, and the disadvantages, of using digital media to introduce, and represent the regions of Scotland to individual tourists, and in an individual manner. My premise is that digital tours enable people—whether they come from home or from a distance—to experience places in self-directed and thoughtful ways.

My idea is based on the experience of collecting, editing and producing a CD-rom, *Northern Folk: Living Traditions of North East Scotland*², with my former colleague, Dr Tom McKean. *Northern Folk* was developed as a team project at the University of Aberdeen's Elphinstone Institute, which promotes, presents and preserves the cultural traditions of Northern Scotland. The idea came from Professor James Porter, Chair of Ethnology at the University of Aberdeen. Tom McKean and I, then Research Fellows at the Institute, developed the idea, conducted the fieldwork and archival research, did the filming and audio recording, helped to develop the programme, and edited the finished product.

We hoped to produce a pocket-sized and peculiarly intimate heritage visitor attraction that would be useful both for those who knew the region, and for potential visitors, with a particular view to the North American market. We decided at a fairly early age to aim our product at the adult market (upper level school students, undergraduates and cultural enthusiasts). The 5-14 guidelines for schools were too limiting for our aims, and we felt that targeting primary school children would have led to a less challenging, if more entertaining, end point.

Producing a CD-ROM seemed a good way to provide a lively introduction to the living traditions of our area, backed up with materials in video, audio and text format. We liked the idea of giving our users the experience of a guided tour, led by real people from our region. The CD-ROM, based around our field-recorded interviews (video and audio) enabled us to create a simulated experience, allowing users to feel as if they were travelling around and meeting people within a community. The people they meet, of course, were selected by us, but represent the multi-talented tradition bearers of North East Scotland: young and old; famous and less famous. We

² Copies of *Northern Folk* can be ordered direct from the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, King's College, Aberdeen, Scotland, or through their website: www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone

wanted to give the sensation of meeting people in different contexts and you'll see people reappear in different sections, coming to prominence in some parts, and quoted in others.

We wanted to reflect the diversity and complexity of North East folk. The CD-ROM features a broad range of people including Carmen Higgins, the fiddler; Stanley Robertson, the storyteller; the Eastons, who are local farmers; the Whytes, fishermen for many generations; Jenny Douglas, an ex music hall worker; the Ballantynes, representing an oil worker's family and the children of Auchterless Sunday School. There's material from throughout the area—from the Moray Firth in the NE to Montrose in the SW—from women and men, and from all ages: our oldest contributor was 95, the youngest 7. All backgrounds, too, are represented: Scots of long standing, whose families could be traced within the area for 400 years, like the Strathdees; new Scots, like Salvatore Vaccarino and the Adrons, from places as diverse as Sicily, Nepal and the SE of England and, as you know, California. New activities, like computer games, stand alongside traditional skills, like long lining.

We also wanted to allow the user to meet people from our area in the past, and people we could not feature in the audio-visual sections. Our format allowed us to intersperse the main sections with quotes from additional speakers from diverse backgrounds. We drew on printed sources, like local histories, and on works of fiction and poetry which we felt imaginatively captured the experiences of living in the North East. Visual materials, too, illustrate and complement what's being said in an aesthetically pleasing way. Materials came from many sources: including photographs we took ourselves and ones that came from contributors' collections, along with images provided by public bodies (including the Regional Archaeology Department, Aberdeen Art Gallery, Elgin Museums & Libraries)

Incidentally, although we did not know this at the time, all these aims are broadly in tune with David Herbert's notion of the stages of interpretation in Heritage Visitor Attractions, as cited in Leask and Yeoman (1999: 84): to relate to experience (educate); seek to reveal (inform); view as art (enhance); seek to stimulate (entertain) and aim for wholeness (manage). The product, in this respect, does work as a miniature tourist attraction by proxy.

As well as its presentation advantages, we decided on the CD-ROM format for technical reasons. We did think about using DVD but, when the project started out in late 1996, the technology was not far enough advanced. We rejected the idea of web-based materials because we wanted the CD-ROM to be a discrete, stand-alone

product, although it does have a hot-link to supplementary articles on the Web. Extensive research informed our choice. We spent a couple of months being computer nerds: visiting places such as the digitising unit at the Museum of Scotland: this was a dispiriting experience given its dedicated team of over twenty people, working on much less ambitious projects. There were relatively few contextualised, cultural CD-ROMs available in the late 90s—the Museum of Civilisation in Canada was producing some excellent ones which, unfortunately, were published slightly too late to be of direct use. We did, though, view a variety of CDs forms, including the sort that come free with computers—*Wild Africa* was unexpectedly useful in providing ideas on interfaces—and children's computer games.

We researched in-house options for production (the medical Computer Assisted Learning unit at Aberdeen was making multimedia productions, as was the Department of Biochemistry), but soon realised that, in the competitive software market, we wanted to work with a professional company. We wanted to work with people with strong aesthetically driven goals, to complement our own experience in educational and academically grounded projects. After visiting various production companies, we decided to work with Concept Productions, who had just developed a set of touch-screen displays for Aberdeen's renovated Maritime Museum. When we started, the company had never made a CD-ROM. Like many Aberdeen-based concerns, they specialised in videos for the oil industry. We struggled to bring academic and production values together (from our side, the main issues was how to storyboard and tightly edit a project with almost three-dimensional qualities, anticipating a user coming in from different points; from their side, maintaining didactic integrity). We felt it was important to work with a company with both multimedia and cultural experience, and Concept's experience on our project means they are now a leading company within this area, for a wide group of clients with diverse cultural and commercial interests.

The project, from the start, was a team-based one. Tom McKean, an American based in Scotland for ten years at the time, and myself were the people working most closely on the project. We decided on the content, decided who we wanted to feature, and conducted the interviews, drawing on people we'd met in the course of our own research, and editing their words. Naively, we wanted the CD to feel as un-edited as possible, representing people's own voices, with few interventions from ourselves. We discovered that the CD-ROM is one of the most heavily edited formats imaginable (two to three hours of film is edited on our CD-ROM in every 1-2 minute audio visual

sequence).

As well as the intellectual issues, we had to be pragmatic and to consider Aberdeen University's financial interests (the Dean of Arts took some convincing). An important member of our team was the AURIS unit: they administer research income for the University and were very helpful with contractual issues. Even so, we ran over budget in the end, and learnt important (if expensive) lessons about costing. The University of Aberdeen provided support in kind in the form of office space and salaries (from late 1996 to mid 1999 we spent most of our time on the project, particularly in its last 6 months). External funding was secured from a variety of sources; not all of it was in place when we began the project; luckily Concept was patient. Fifty percent of our funding came through the Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network. Grampian Enterprise, now Scottish Enterprise: Grampian, gave us a grant of £20,000. The Moray Trust, a local organisation, gave us £10,000. The Scottish Arts Council provided £250 to record the programme soundtrack.

The programme itself contains the following elements: 300 full screen images; 25 minutes video; 35 minutes audio, including the specially-recorded soundtrack, 300 screens of texts (combining interview material, poetry, prose, extracts from historical works), 97,000 words of text in total. It includes information about a wide range of traditional culture: fishing, farming, storytelling, song, music, belief, custom, domestic life, industry and entertainment.

The CD-ROM opens with introductory slideshow, containing a selection of the images in the programme, and accompanied by the Carmen Higgins soundtrack of fiddle music, some with guitar accompaniment. This also comes into play as the screen saver. The repeat user can skip the slideshow at an early stage of viewing, when the 'start' button appears. Then, the user can choose their language for navigation: we consciously chose to use the three main languages of Scotland, particularly as this was envisaged as part of a series. North East Scots is the default, and there are options for English and Gaelic. After selecting language, the user can choose from four sections: Work, Domestic, Community, Recreation and then choose from three further options in each of these. Once a section has been selected, there are four or five introductory screens consisting of a general introduction to the chosen topic. The user is then encouraged to select 'Fowk': a slideshow of video images, stills and discussions: at this level the user meets the folk featured in the CD-ROM.

Additional navigation options include working through the 'Gallery' section: this allows the user to view the CD images full-

screen size, and to read a vast range of interview, archival and book-based extracts. All the sources for all the material in the CD-ROM are identified, and it is possible to listen to additional soundtrack music and song passages. From the Gallery, the user can enter a map section, locating people and places and offering an alternative navigation route. There is, in addition, a 'Further Resources' section, listing bibliography, places to find information (libraries, archives, museums, galleries) in the North East with brief annotations, a listing of related video and audio recorded material and the dates and places of birth of all our contributors. There is also a hotlink to articles, teacher and student notes and resources, based at the Elphinstone Institute's website at the University of Aberdeen. Finally, the user selects 'exit' and is prompted (in Scots) either to 'gang awa' or 'bide'; the former option prompts a showing of credits, listing all our sponsors and all the people involved in the project, before the programme stops.

On completion, and subsequently, we felt that this project had several real advantages. The virtual tour experience, for instance, does allow the user to gain a real sense of engagement, and to enjoy the simulated experience of being 'guided' by real people. The user can travel at her, or his, own speed, focusing on personal interests, and returning to different areas, or navigating by different routes. The project promotes and celebrates a local community and brings together a variety of people and institutions.

There are, of course, disadvantages. The biggest of these is expense: this project cost over £50,000, and had additional costs, hidden at the outset to the inexperienced in digital technology. These included copyright clearance; payments for the digitisation of photos to exact specifications; the hiring of professional standard equipment (digital cameras at this time were not of a sufficient quality and we had to use Betacam equipment which the University did not possess); the use of materials (where some providers, such as Aberdeen Art Gallery, generously allowed us free access to transparencies from their collection for a modest flat fee, others asked for much more). Furthermore, a high degree of professionalism was required: Tom and I had to learn to become professional standard camera crew and required training in production and post-production. Some of these drawbacks, as the technology has now advanced, have disappeared (the latest digital video, for instance, is quite a high enough standard to use on screen).

As well as expenses, there are drawbacks related to the highly technical nature of the project. As with any filming project, you are

bringing vast quantities of expensive equipment (hired in our case) into people's houses with the awkwardness of setting up, and the intrusiveness of it all; some people respond well, others (children in particular) can find it daunting. Technical faults can also hamper the process. Filming the section on Piper Alpha, for instance, our front light blew out although this worked out quite well: we continued filming with what turned out to be quite an artful dark background effect.

It is, perhaps, even more difficult to learn to think digital, when you are used to the linear demands of article and book writing: this proved to be a huge learning curve. The nature of the medium partly determined the message: on CD, short, bite-sized sections are ideal, remembering that material can be accessed through any part of the programme. In the end we found the medium leads to extremely heavy editing, rather than the lightness of touch we had hoped for.

The demands of our partners were also heavy: SCRAN, for instance, required detailed documentation of the images provided as part of our contract; finally, we had to renegotiate and repay a small part of their grant, as the demands proved difficult to fulfil. This sort of project, too, requires a good base within the community for success. Fortunately, our own collection work meant we had a network of people to draw on for suggestions and resources. Maintaining community support is crucial in this context, as is fulfilling community expectations: people can feel very let down when material they have freely offered is not publicised; luckily our contributors were happy.

The project was also very time-consuming, taking three years from the initial concept to completion, with six months solid work towards the end. At this stage, we faced long working days, partly to use our hired equipment to its fullest. During filming, a typical day might be: in at 9, off to locate and copy some photographs from a library (with our portable copy stand); an afternoon of filming in the field; back to the office to edit the filming; go for a pizza at 10; home around 11/12 and back in at 9 again the next day to repeat the experience. At the other end of the process, we faced proof reading in three formats: a nightmare!

The competitive nature of CD production was equally daunting: we wanted our product to look good on the shelf alongside something produced by Sony. We realised professional marketing was also essential, and used a local distributor and on-line sales: this seemed the right decision at the time but, in retrospect, was not the right way to proceed. In future projects, I would always seek a mainstream

publisher who specialises in CD-ROM titles.

Having said all this, I still think the CD-ROM could be a model for promoting tourism and educating people abroad, and at home, about South West Scotland. I do, of course, have some reservations: funding must be in place, and considered at a detailed level before engaging on the project. At the moment I am working on a new project, and receiving assistance in securing funding from the Research and Enterprise team at the University of Glasgow, where I now work. My current bids will, hopefully, secure us high quality digitisation resources, to cut the high production costs we will still need to meet. Glasgow University has a unit dedicated to digitisation in areas of heritage, linked to the Hunterian museum, HATTI, and I shall be drawing on their help. I may also go back to Concept for assistance as, having developed this programme, they can complete a follow-up for considerably less. Local resources in Dumfries & Galloway are also of a very high standard: I have access, for instance, to a significant number of high-quality field-recorded interviews generated, and permission-cleared, by Crichton students, usually with transcripts (we were not able to generate these in bulk at Aberdeen) and there are, of course, wonderful resources in the Dumfries Archives; the Dumfries Ewart Library; Broughton House (Hornel's collection in Kirkcudbright) and elsewhere. I think that the idea of a series helps. My new project will have links to the first CD-ROM: as a teaching aid I have found it immensely useful and, as my students are now tired of North East Scotland, this provides an incentive to complete a CD on the South West. There are new models, of course, to view, as the CD-ROM medium has advanced considerably since 1999.

There are a few things I shall do differently this time. For a start, I plan to be much more focused in the early stages. I shall start by filming, decide what intriguing issues emerge, and interview around them. We went in as traditional folklore researchers, hoping our ideas would emerge from extensive collecting in the area. With a project like this, we wasted time. In future, I plan on a week or two of intensive filming with people I know well; then I shall edit the clips and conduct additional interviews around these clips, to complement the audio-visuals. I also plan to adopt a different thematic approach. Given the backup at the Crichton Tourism Research Centre, it makes sense to focus on links between the environment and cultural traditions, lending a different flavour to the project. My own role, too, will be different: directing rather than all parts. As Head of Scottish Studies at Crichton, I do not have the research time I did at

Elphinstone. One reviewer commented that:

On the CD sleeve, McKean and Bold are described, too modestly, as editors—they have clearly been far more active than that word suggests, as energetic researchers, finding fascinating archive materials, and also as very active and imaginative field-workers, interviewing and filming the length and breadth of the North East. They deserve their editorial credit, however, because they have synthesised their diverse materials skilfully, and organised them so that they are both accessible and entertaining. (Milton 2001)

It is a complimentary review, of course, but the tasks the reviewer outlines are absolutely right: you have to be prepared to research in the field and in archives and in libraries and in photo archives and in private collections: it all takes time! I do, though, have a valuable resource in our students. As part of our forthcoming, and highly innovative fourth-year, eight able students will be completing a digital product (probably a set of web pages) considering the cultural and environmental landscape of our area; this will generate further material that will feed in, credited, to the new publication. I may also use DVD, although it still seems that CD-ROM, which allows for more interactivity, may be the best medium. I plan to use digital video for filming; the quality is now acceptable compared to professional-quality Betacam film as we used. As I said above, I will also use a professional publisher; since our project started, several academic publishers, like Routledge for instance, have initiated specialist digital media lists.

There are, though, some things I would do the same. Most importantly, I hope to work with people I trust intellectually; our team dynamics worked very well. It is important that everyone involved understands, and contributes to, the developing ethos of the project. I would hope, too, to maintain the excitement and sense of fun in making a miniature visitor attraction. It does allow users to meet people travelling through the region who they might not normally meet as tourists: from people in their homes, like Isobel Easton or the Ballantyne family, to people as unusual and vibrant as the Black Douglas brothers.

I think it is worthwhile to make a CD-ROM for the SW because of the possibility of communicating the experience of meeting people who know the region first hand, whether as tourists or at home. The ability to give multi-media impressions of an area is useful as is the

way you can interlink diverse images, and experiences, to give a holistic impression of living within, and experiencing, the landscape within a specific area. I would, however, be interested in what the professionals working within this area think, before embarking on the proposed new project, particularly about the validity of such an approach within the context of tourism.

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